

## Songs of Protest, Songs of Love: Popular Ballads in Eighteenth-Century Britain

**Review Number:**

980

**Publish date:**

Friday, 1 October, 2010

**Author:**

Robin Ganev

**ISBN:**

9780719078903

**Date of Publication:**

2009

**Price:**

£60.00

**Pages:**

256pp.

**Publisher:**

Manchester University Press

**Place of Publication:**

Manchester

**Reviewer:**

Vic Gammon

A new book in one's specialist area, in this case the historical and cultural study of popular song, is a reason for both excitement and anticipation. Excitement because one wonders what new insights the work will disclose, what new sources will be revealed and in what ways the area of study will be moved forward. One anticipates the ways in which the book will engage with what has been written and the (as yet unknown) ways in which the book might reveal the need to revise established positions and interpretations. That a new work in the area should be welcomed is undoubted; an area of study needs a critical mass of scholars working within it to create a necessary dynamic to develop the field of study.

Ganev has written a book which is explicitly about popular ballads in 18th-century England (which she defines as about 1700 to 1830). The first chapter seeks to clarify what popular ballads are and answer the question what they can tell the historian. Chapters two and three deal with ballads as social criticism generally, and specifically in relation to the question of enclosure. Four and five deal with rural labour, firstly in terms of celebration of the life of work and secondly in terms of the celebration of rural labourers' sexuality. The final chapter is on the work of Hannah More and her attempts to reform popular morality, in part through a critique of and at the same time through the use of the popular ballad form. There is also a conclusion which largely summarises the findings of earlier chapters. These are all good topics, well worthy of investigation. Ganev is not reticent in declaring her accomplishment in the book: 'This book has extended our knowledge of the place songs occupied in popular culture' (p. 218) although in fairness she immediately adds that 'In some ways it has raised more questions than it has answered'. I will review the book in terms of its accuracy, the quality of the writing, and the validity of its interpretations, asking to what extent it has

extended our knowledge of the field.

The book seeks to examine the 'relationship between historical change and popular song'. There has been an increasing tendency in recent years for historians to use ballad collections as source material and this has produced some interesting work, for example in material written by V. A. C. Gatrell, Patrick Joyce and J. A. Sharpe.<sup>(1)</sup> These works use ballads as a particular type of source material to illuminate and inform broader concerns. Fewer works have placed the song material at the centre of their studies. Both approaches have their strengths but ballad material is a difficult to work with; its provenance, authorship and date are often uncertain. Although ballad material contains repeated themes and genres it also expresses multiple and contradictory discourses. There is not one simple ballad view of the world; the popular culture of pre-industrial Britain was not monolithic. Interpretation of ballad material is often difficult from a modern standpoint and the writer can easily not be aware of the extent of circulation of the material, its discursive reach, and the way it accretes meanings and significances in the processes of transmission. The difficulty of the project in no way invalidates the enterprise; this is a fascinating area. But it does demand of the writer both humility and care. Ganev was not always as careful as she could have been. The problems of accuracy in the book range from downright error to significant problems of interpretation. I will give some examples of such problems early in the book.

Ganev states 'Charles Harding Firth (1857–1936) was a historian of the 17th century who collected broadside ballads ... but he left no writings about ballads and we do not know his motivations and preferences' (p. 17). Firth left some very significant writings about broadside ballads – Carnell lists 29 publications related to the subject.<sup>(2)</sup> Much in Ganev's spirit Firth wrote that ballads 'throw a light upon the history of the past which we could not derive from other sources'.<sup>(3)</sup> Firth had an excellent analytical mind and produced an interesting classification system for the ballad material he examined. From his writings we can gain a good sense of his motivations and preferences.

Other falsifiable statements are too common in the book. Thus we read 'The music, or tune, was also more fixed than the text. We seldom get the music notation in broadsides or chapbooks but we are often told the name of the tune, which would have been well known at the time' (p. 14). Declaring that she will deal primarily with the texts, Ganev writes that the analysis of the music will have to be left to musicologists. To anyone with the slightest knowledge of the folk music scholarship of the last couple of centuries, this statement is rather naive. It has long been known that oral/aural tradition wreaks wondrous variation and change on music circulated by the medium, whilst at the same time maintaining elements of stability over long periods of time. The more we examine printed and manuscript musical sources the more we realise that such change is not limited to aurally circulating melodies, rather written music reflects changes in the use and realisation of melodic material. This may be a reflection of aural processes but certainly has its manifestation in nothing we could describe as fixity. To see the changes wrought in successive written versions of a workhorse ballad and dance tune such as 'Greensleeves' never fails to surprise and interest me. Ganev may well 'deal primarily with the words' (p. 14) but not fully to appreciate the malleability of the material we are dealing with seems a severe limitation.

On p. 15 we find a number of dubious statements. We read 'Another way to date ballads is to look for the title in the lists kept by some printers like the London Stationers Company and John Pitts'. The Stationers Company was not a printer, it was a guild set up to regulate and control the trade in printed material; its members were printers, bookbinders and booksellers. It settled disputes among members and (of great value to the historian) registered publications. On the same page we read 'When British folklorists began recording folk songs in the 1900s they were often surprised by the degree to which the same songs appeared in different areas throughout Britain'. A very few of those who collected traditional songs might have described themselves as folklorists, but on the whole they would not, nor would folklorists have described them as such. Only a tiny number of song collectors belonged to the Folklore Society, although many were imbued with the prevailing spirit of folklorism. The song collectors were musicians and musical amateurs. And whilst it is true that the period from c.1900 to the Great War was something of a golden age of collecting, with luminaries like Sharp, Vaughan Williams and Grainger in action, they were building on the work of people such as Herd, Ritson, Motherwell, Jamieson, Dixon, Child, the Broadwoods, Kidson, Barratt

and Baring Gould who had made collections (including, in many cases, collections of broadsheets ballads as well as songs from oral tradition) over the previous century. Ganev uses the words ‘musicologist’ and ‘folklorist’ in a way that shows that she does not have a significant appreciation of the disciplinary meanings of these terms.

Ganev states ‘It would be well if we could access the oral life of popular ballads or find evidence of how each of them was interpreted by people from different walks of life’ (p. 68). The latter part of the statement is a tall order but one sometimes comes across interesting observations on songs by people from different social positions. However, it is precisely ‘the oral life of popular ballads’ that collectors of traditional song have been accessing for a couple of hundred years. That accessing began in the period that Ganev is writing about. The source material produced by collectors is not without its difficulties of use, but it well rewards engagement. The ‘afterlife’ of some of the songs Ganev discusses in relation to the period 1700–1830 gives strong evidence of their hold on popular imagination.

I could continue in this vein. There are examples of factual errors and misconceptions throughout the book, but suffice it to say that the work rests on an insecure foundation. We all make mistakes, but the breadth of understanding demonstrated here seems insufficient for the enterprise in hand. In reading the book the flow of the argument is constantly interrupted by statements and assertions that are dubious, insubstantial or just plain wrong.

Let me turn briefly to a consideration of some of the contents of the various chapters. The problems discussed above are all from chapter one, ‘What are popular ballads and what can they tell historians?’ There is some good content here: ballads transcended print; literacy was the basis of an expanding print trade. There is some terminological confusion (p. 13) when the writer contrasts ‘white letter’ ballads (a medium, sheets printed with Roman rather than gothic, ‘black letter’ type) with ‘traditional ballads’ (a genre, ballads transmitted by tradition and having stylistic characteristics). In reality many white letter sheets carried traditional ballads. The identification of ‘Jack of Newbury’ as a traditional ballad (p. 13) is, to my knowledge, incorrect. *Jack of Newbury* is an early novel (which contains some ballad material) by Thomas Deloney, who was also a ballad writer – this might be the basis of the confusion. (‘Jack of Newbury’ was also produced as a comic opera in the 1790s!) The chapter is mainly a synthesis of secondary sources, some popular rather than scholarly in approach. There is a disarming lack of discrimination about the relative quality of the work synthesised. Most surprisingly there is a lack of discussion of the excellent writings of Adam Fox, whose work is much more significant than a number of the authors cited, but perhaps overlooked because its date range ends in 1700.[\(4\)](#)

The discourse of the book improves when the writer starts interacting with source materials rather than summarising other people’s work, even if some of the interpretations are disputable. In chapters two and three Ganev explores the use of ballad as social criticism. She makes much of what seems to be a ‘gap’ in the publication of songs of complaint ‘after 1700’ (p. 44). Yet in a footnote she states ‘This is not a precise date. The first songs of rural complaint I have found in the eighteenth century come from the Douce collection, and could have been printed anywhere between 1736 and 1766’ (p.70, n.12). Half a century is potentially reduced to just over a third of a century and this supposed gap may simply be an illusion caused by the chance survival of evidence. One of the problems with ballad material (in contrast say to newspaper accounts) is that it is often hard or impossible to give the specific chronologies with which many historians are most comfortable. Those good people at the Bodleian Library who have tried to specify printer’s dates of operation give me the impression of expressing less certainty about their findings than Ganev does. I am not disputing that the content of ballad material changed over time in response to changing circumstances, but dates are not as certain as Ganev wants them to be. Equally if we ignore the long term continuities of the popular ballad repertory we distort our perception of the evidence, and these continuities can be very impressive.

In seeking to fit a tight chronological framework the histories of songs themselves tend to be ignored. There is a discussion of the song ‘When my old hat was new’ which Ganev states was ‘printed in numerous versions around 1800’ (p. 84) although later in the book she writes ‘the earliest version I could find comes

from 1820–4’ (p. 91). She appropriately relates the song to feelings against enclosure around that time. All this may well be true, but Ganey seems not to have noticed that by 1800 this was already a very old song indeed. As ‘When this old cap was new’ or ‘Times alteration’ it is preserved in the Roxburgh and Pepys ballad collections. The song was written by the ballad writer Martin Parker around 1620 and celebrates an imagined past time of hospitality and good manners ‘when this old cap was new’. Versions and glimpses of the song can be detected in 18th-century sources. What is particularly interesting about the song is the way it survived and was adapted to changing circumstances. The song was known to the poet John Clare; had an afterlife beyond the early years of the 19th century; and 20th-century folk song collectors found versions of it in Hampshire, Durham and Aberdeenshire. More recently it has been heard in the repertoires of performers of traditional song and has been recorded a number of times. A life of approaching 400 years for an evolving song is moderately impressive.

Although ‘plebeian representations of social tensions were balanced by a far larger body of literature portraying a harmonious social world’ (p. 44) the songs of protest are significant and Ganey draws our attention to some interesting examples supporting the traditional ‘moral economy’. The use of ‘The miller’s advice to his three sons in taking of toll’ (p. 47) can hardly be taken as indicative of a new mood or attitude. I have not traced the song earlier than c. 1750 but it expresses an old idea of millers as cheats and swindlers (they are also often cast as sexually opportunistic). A ballad of the later 17th century says:

But yet for all those callings,  
I am a *Miller* born,  
And out of e’ry Bushel,  
I pinch a peck of Corn.[\(5\)](#)

My use of this quotation reminds me that the amount of source material reproduced in historical writing is often a hard question of balance. Given the relative obscurity and difficulty of access of a lot of the material Ganey draws on I am not sure she gives anywhere near enough. The cases in which she reproduces images of whole songs are valuable as this allows us at least to contextualise extracts

Ganey is prone to making statements, sometimes contentious statements, and giving little or no evidence to support them. Thus she writes: ‘Many ballads about poaching appear to be from the late nineteenth century but there are a few from the early 1800s’. One of the classic English poaching songs, ‘The death of Bill Brown’ relates to a known incident that happened in 1769 (Ganey comments on this song on p. 97). ‘In Thorneymoor Woods’ was circulating in Sussex before The Rev. John Broadwood published it in 1843 and is on broadsides of a similar or earlier vintage. ‘The Rufford Park poachers’ is based on an incident which occurred in 1851. Tasmania changed its name from Van Diemen’s Land upon being granted colonial self-government in 1856; it was a penal colony for most of the first half of the 19th century and is named as the destination of convicted poachers in a number of songs. It is true that later 19th-century ballad printers continued to issue songs about poaching and the crime continued to be significant, but I find no evidence that many poaching songs are late 19th century in origin.

On p. 78 Ganey makes a distinction between ‘the social cost of enclosure’ and ‘its economic impact on the poor’; I am not sure what this distinction means. John Clare certainly articulated an aesthetic view of the detrimental effect of enclosure, remembering the pre-enclosure land as ‘this sweet vision of my boyish hours’. But Clare she claims, citing other writers, avoided ‘the argument that enclosure impoverished the peasantry’ (p. 78). I am not sure how one can read Clare’s echoing lines

Inclosure came and trampled on the grave

Of labour’s rights and left the poor a slave.[\(6\)](#)

without thinking this has clear economic implications; it is the loss of rights to unenclosed and common land that has destroyed the labourer's degree of economic independence.

Chapters four and five deal with the celebration of the life of work and the celebration of rural labourers' sexuality. Craft pride is an important and perhaps under-explored topic and relates to notions of independence and self-reliance. One would have thought that a discussion of Gerald Porter's book on *The English Occupational Song* might have figured here but it is not even in the bibliography. The writer has a way of rendering subtle and nuanced accounts of some writers into bald and over-generalising one-liners that reflect none of the complexity of the sources. She writes, for example: 'Historians tend to conclude that the literary/artistic celebrations of the supposed pleasures of manual work were false while accounts of pain were true'. This sweeping statement is referenced to Keith Thomas's 'Introduction' to *The Oxford Book of Work*. In a similar way we are also told that 'Harvest songs accompanied the celebrations after harvest in both north and south. There is no evidence regarding what particular songs were performed at these times ...' The first sentence is true, the second is not; songs specifically for harvest home have been collected in both England and Scotland and older sources preserve what look like harvest home songs. In addition literary accounts of the custom give significant detail of singing. Ronald Hutton comments on the eclecticism of songs sung at the events but also records specific harvest songs.<sup>(7)</sup> Hutton's work does not appear in the bibliography.

It is in chapter five, 'Milkmaids and ploughmen: the celebration of rural labourers' sexuality' that Ganey comes closest to some of my own work. Ganey is keen to stress the importance of an ideal of 'peasant beauty and attractiveness' (p. 149) which was defined against a notion of 'impotent nobility'. There is something in this but it may be little more than a version of the country versus city trope, which Ganey admits (p. 153). It also seems to be an idea that circulated among the educated rather than rural labourers. She stresses that songs 'allowed female characters considerable agency' and that 'the sexuality of both labouring men and women was celebrated by popular ballads' (p. 151, see also p. 217). What is meant here by celebrated and who is doing the celebrating? She commends me for cautioning against the idea that songs reflected reality and then seems to proceed in some ways as if they did. Thus we read of the 'considerable sexual freedom' (p. 166) of the period, which was nevertheless subject to 'limits of what was sexually permissible'. The book jacket picks up on these ideas, commenting on the 'free and easy sexuality of rural workers' in the period. Ganey writes that illegitimacy is 'seldom described as a disaster' in songs (p. 162). This is not so, abandonment and illegitimacy is the theme of a considerable number of moving and eloquent songs.

My true love hath left me I know not why

Left me and my baby in sorrow to cry,

My father and mother forget I never shall

How they've turned their backs on the Wandering Girl.<sup>(8)</sup>

The girl, first promised marriage and then abandoned by her lover, is rejected by parents and friends in this song issued in York in the early years of the 19th century. Physically and emotionally ruined by what has happened to her the song ends with a warning to other young women: 'Never trust to a man in any degree'.

Ganey writes 'Porter and Hall's argument that sex was only allowed between courting couples where there was an expectation of marriage, and that loose women or men who brought bastards into the world would be condemned is not verified by my evidence' (p. 162). I suggest the problem is not with Porter and Hall. Generally, Ganey offers no significant engagement with writers that have come to interpretations that are significantly different from hers.

Ganev's vision of pre-industrial society is not a fully worked through or integrated one. It runs counter to the image of a regulating and in some ways self-regulating society, constrained by custom and sanction, gossip, rough music, church courts, the petty sessions and the poor law, that has been carefully built up in recent years by historians, even given some loosening of customary restraint in the later 18th century. Ganev seems to both know something of the social and economic history of class and gender relations and simultaneously resist fully understanding the implications of this knowledge.

The work of the evangelical reformer Hannah More forms the subject matter of chapter six. Here we are on firmer grounds and the work draws on some good secondary sources. More both despised popular ballads as 'dirty and indecent stuff' (p. 161) and made use of the idiom to promote her views about how the lower orders should behave. Ganev writes of More's 'fake ballads' (p. 107) and she feels it is clear that 'the poor could distinguish between culture that was created by them or reflected their values and culture that that was imposed upon them from above (p. 208). In many cases this was probably true, but it is interesting to note that a century after More had published her Cheap Repository Tracts, the moralistic ballad 'The ploughboys dream', written not by More but by her associate Rev. William Mason and published by her, was found in oral tradition by song collectors in England and Scotland.<sup>(9)</sup> It had been reprinted on ballad sheets and become part of oral culture.

There are many other aspects of the book I could comment on, (for example, the unqualified statements of assumptions as truths, the relationship between popular ballads and the work of 'peasant poets', an interesting but problematic area, and the whole issue of the way that Ganev makes quantitative statements which are simply not provable or for which no quantitative evidence is given) but this response to the book is already too long. There are some passages of interest and insight in the book but I have not enjoyed reading it or writing this review. I wanted this book to be a significant contribution to a fascinating if somewhat specialist area of research. It fails to be this. The noise created by the problems of the text tends to drown out the interesting things the writer has to say. The writer must bear responsibility for this, but something must also be said about the role of academic supervisors and examiners (it has all the signs of originating as a PhD), and publishers and their readers (a university press in this case), in the process of the book's formation and production. One feels the writer could and should have been helped to produce a much better book than here offered.

## Notes

1. See for example, V. A. C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770–1868* (Oxford, 1994); Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848–1914* (Cambridge, 1994). J. A. Sharpe, "'Last Dying Speeches": religion, ideology and public execution in seventeenth century England', *Past and Present*, 107 (1985). Interestingly, only Gatrell features in Ganev's bibliography.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Peter W. Carnell, *Ballads in the Charles Harding Firth Collection of the University of Sheffield: A Descriptive Catalogue with Indexes* (Sheffield, 1979) pp. xiii-xiv.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. C. H. Firth, 'The ballad history of the reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 2 (1908), 21.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford, 2000).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Jovial Tom of all trades [sic], or, The Various cries of London-city to the tune of A Begging we will go* [broadsheet, London, 1687?].[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. *Selected Poems and Prose of John Clare*, ed. Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield (London, 1967) 169–70.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun : A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford, 1996) 342–4.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Bodleian Library Broadside Ballads, Firth b.34 (306).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. See *Cheap Repository Shorter Tracts*. (London, 1798) 417–8. *Marrowbones: English Folk Songs from the Hammond and Gardiner Manuscripts*, ed. Frank Purslow (Revised ed., London, 2007) p. 163.

[Back to \(9\)](#)

**Other reviews:**

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/980#comment-0>

**Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/5062>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>